

**ROLE OF EDUCATION IN TRANSCENDING BIRTH AND SOCIAL CLASS: A  
COMPARISON OF JANE AUSTEN'S MANSFIELD PARK AND LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S  
AN OLD FASHIONED GIRL**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Jane Austen's novels also known as the novels of manners belonged to the genre of moral-domestic novels that empowered women in the domestic life in the nineteenth century England focusing on the family dynamics in grooming the young adolescent women. Louisa May Alcott was the shining star of domestic fiction written for girls in nineteenth-century America. Domestic fiction also known as sentimental novels were written by women for young adolescent girls which revealed the dominant American culture and society in which they lived. The aim of this paper is to explore the journey of the female protagonists who in their adolescence are not led by temptations of class and wealth but practice the virtue of self-denial in creating an identity on attaining adulthood. In addition, this paper is multidisciplinary n approach in comparing the family and social environment of nineteenth century England and America as described in the novels that is significant to the self-education of the female protagonists.*

**KEYWORDS:** Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, nineteenth century, England, America.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

*Mansfield Park:*

Referred to as a novel on female education, Austen criticizes the grooming patterns of parents and the society of the young teenage girls, where formal and informal education for females focuses on accomplishments and superficiality rather than the Christian virtues and the holistic development of women. Austen criticizes the lack of proper education for women and the grooming by the family with a selfish motive for their daughters to appear attractive in a bargain of mercenary marriages. Young women were victims of discrimination and the double standards of their ostensible grooming. Austen herself emerged as a popular writer and wrote Mansfield Park during the transitional phase when women were emerging as a major force in publishing with conditions favourable for female authorship. Austen highlights the significance of good education for a female that develops mature judgments and objectivity in assessing people and circumstances.

Mansfield Park represents the rural upper middle-class England comprising of a few families, where Fanny, Austen's exemplary heroine is brought up by her wealthy maternal aunt because of her parents' financial condition and their short-sightedness as parents. Fanny comes to realize her true identity as being deep-rooted in the rural community she originates from, as inbred with modesty, compassion, and humanity for the larger good of the Universe when compared to the selfishness and insensitivity of the urban life.

**An Old-Fashioned Girl:**

The novel describes Polly, Alcott's heroine as a fourteen-year-old, humble country girl who visits her close friend Fanny Shaw, a wealthy fashionable girl living in the city. One summer, Polly, described as old-fashioned by the author visits her good friend Fanny Shaw to witness and experience the city life. The Shaw family comprises of Mr. Shaw, a busy gentleman engrossed in his business, Mrs. Shaw, a pale and nervous lady, their daughters Fanny, fourteen years old and Maud, five years old, their son Tom, and Grandma who is described as being as old-fashioned as Polly and lives in solitude confined to her room with her antique stuff. Polly becomes an extended member in the Shaw's house.

Fanny is privileged in studying in a fashionable school where she learns French, German and Italian with no time for English; whereas Polly is a poor countryside girl whose mother cannot afford to send her to school regularly; except twice or thrice a week to cope with her music and French. She is unlike Fanny, who as a young teenage girl considers herself a young lady. In Alcott's novels, compassion for humanity and charity gives the Victorian women a sense of identity in society and a feeling of self-empowerment on their journey to self-actualization.

**COMPARING MANSFIELD PARK AND AN OLD FASHIONED GIRL:**

Austen's Fanny Price in Mansfield Park and Alcott's Polly belong to the impoverished rural setup and represent the lower middle class of nineteenth-century England and America. Although similar in their family background the two families differ in the environment they provide for the physical, mental and emotional development of their children and their approach to grooming them. Fanny's mother Mrs Price is faced with the challenge of bearing the burden of her nine children and the responsibility of her husband who is callous, irresponsible and extravagant in buying exquisite liquor despite the limited resources.

Like Mr Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, Fanny's father Mr Price emulates the higher class in their extravagance and vices. Fanny is adopted by her maternal aunt Lady Bertram who is a motherly figure to her but to Fanny's destiny, her biological mother and her foster mother are ignorant mothers. Fanny is groomed by a governess in Mansfield Park for learning French and history and does not attend a formal school for her education.

The ignorance of mothers in Austen's novels and their crucial role in grooming their young adolescents to adulthood is connected to the historical and social past of England. Tracy J. Suzuki observes that "the mothers are a connecting link in the long-standing cultural traditions of England's past in its relation to England's past and future through the education of their daughters, while the daughters represent an integral part of England's fortune and vision. As part of the past, Austen's mothers are meant to be flawed; that is, they are meant to be outdated because their daughters represent, for good or bad, the changes occurring in England." (2-3) Austen's mothers prove to be an antithesis to an ideal mother in grooming their daughters. Austen's heroines like Austen herself, are in conflict with their mothers as Eliza in *Pride and Prejudice* and Fanny in *Mansfield Park* who observes her mother's indifference towards her. Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* emulates her mother which demeans her to being a fallen woman.

Austen's fathers are physically or emotionally absent from the concerns of the family making them equally irresponsible as mothers. If physically present, Austen's fathers maintain a distance from the

domestic affairs of the family but indulge in extravagance and hobbies to keep themselves entertained in their free time. Austen's fathers represent the patriarchal order in nineteenth-century England where men were occupied in public spheres and expected their wives to conform to the private spheres of domesticity and grooming their children. Austen believed in Locke's philosophy of the education of children in charging parents with equal responsibility of nurturing, grooming and educating them.

As mothers lacked education, they were incompetent in grooming their daughters for the changing environment of the society and as class-consciousness became more prominent they considered domestic accomplishments the tasks of the working class. Hence Austen's mothers are trapped in a conflict of ignorance and modernization. Alcott's Polly is privileged in attending a formal school thrice a week for learning music and French since the family cannot bear the cost of regular formal schooling.

Polly's mother is a hardworking, patient and an enduring mother with Christian virtues. She is Polly's role model, guide and mentor to Polly in resisting her temptations of glamour when Polly goes to the city to live with a close, wealthy friend Fanny Shaw. Alcott's female characters bond with the spirit of sisterhood irrespective of their financial background and status which represents the principle of equality in democratic America. On the other hand, Fanny is discriminated by her cousins and the larger community for her poverty and lower social status. This highlights the impact of society on the grooming which may not be verbally taught formally or informally but carries through observations of the cultural and traditional practices. Victorian England was a class conscious society where the upper class, landed gentry and the wealthy were respected and individuals and families were appreciated for their upper-class connections. Alcott's mothers are closely bonded by the motherly affection and are unwilling to detach themselves from the filial affection of their daughters even in the face of poverty.

Like Marmee of *Little Women* Polly's mother would have never parted with her daughter Polly although she is an asset to the Shaw family and a role model for their daughter Fanny. Both Fanny and Polly are not captivating at first sights like Austen's Eliza in *Pride and Prejudice* and Alcott's Jo in *Little Women*. They have a simple disposition with simplicity in their mannerisms and etiquettes.

Fanny is timid and shy and contemplative of her future in *Mansfield Park* instilling feelings of insecurity, of being unloved and fearful of the environment. Fanny's basic or deficiency needs of Maslow's hierarchy are unfulfilled and suffer from low self-esteem because of her instability of life with her impoverished parents and the uncertainties that *Mansfield Park* may offer. Polly is quiet and reserved with a calm composure but is guided appropriately by her mother in discovering the world when she goes for a visit to the city. Polly has learnt from her participating in the experiences of the family and the rural environment she lives in. Like Alcott's other families in her novels, Polly is groomed in a congenial family atmosphere that encouraged and supported her learning and growth.

Fanny is not led by temptations but has to overcome the barriers of her fear and the lack of support and feeling of warmth at *Mansfield Park*. However, Fanny bears all discrimination with a smile in her realization of the contributions of *Mansfield Park* and the Bertram family that made her learning and grooming distinct from her other siblings at *Portsmouth*. Fanny in aristocratic England is not expected to be self-sufficient but, like Polly learns the virtue of self-denial in seeking contentment and happiness in being grateful to the Bertram family. She is not socially accomplished and does not have the privilege of attending balls but transforms through her self-education and mentorship of her cousin Edward into a

socially agreeable and accomplished woman.

Polly in democratic America has to shoulder the responsibility of her family in being self-reliant and returns to the city at the turn of adolescence to create her own identity in being a music teacher. Despite her limited income, she supports her younger brother in his studies and also indulges in charity work. Polly's grooming has moulded her into an emotionally strong and independent woman and is neither emotionally dependent on any male for emotional and moral support.

Like Austen's heroines, Fanny Price is emotionally dependent on Edward and Austen highlights that her emotional dependence empowers Edward to take charge of her. Austen's Fanny and Alcott's Polly are assets to the family they live with the Shaw family and the Bertram family. When faced with hard knocks in life, the families turn to the heroines for emotional and moral support realizing their dependence on them. The two girls are a pride to the families and are respectable in society with a good reputation. Fanny's grooming has been uncertain and inconsistent which affects her self-esteem in her early years of childhood. The Price family is an example of Baumrind's negligent parenting style with a damn-care attitude and insensitivity to the requirements of the family.

They are characterized by low conversation and low conformity which characterizes them with the laissez-faire patterns of family communication. Fanny's grooming in Mansfield Park has been distinct although she had to cope with the incompetence of the parenting styles of the Bertram family. Mrs Bertram is a permissive parent while negligent and uninvolved too with her children and Sir Thomas is an authoritarian parent which bears a negative impact on the daughters but Fanny is grateful for all that is granted to her in Mansfield Park.

Sir Thomas is characterized by protective patterns of family communication where Sir Thomas is a strict disciplinarian and has high expectations but remains distant and reserved from his children who are happier when he is away from home. Sir Thomas represents Austen's absent father who is physically away from home but participates to some extent in the grooming of his daughters.

Polly has been brought up and groomed by an Authoritative parenting style and Consensual patterns of family communication which is a catalyst to her personality development. Her poverty is not a limitation to her self-esteem and worth in the family, community and society. The difference in parenting styles patterns of family communication and the environment contribute in a monumental way to the grooming of the two girls in the nineteenth century.

Fanny is born to faulty parents but is destined to good fortune in being privileged to the education of Mansfield Park and her learning is complemented by her passion for reading. Fanny succeeds in overcoming the superficial judgments of the society and being respected for her simplicity, morals and virtues. In achieving and experiencing self-actualization, Fanny has to bear with Maslow's deficiency needs that include physiological needs, security needs, love and belongingness and her self-esteem needs before she is moulded to reason and wisdom in making decisions that enable her to experience transient moments or peak experiences of self-actualization.

Fanny achieves autonomy and independence on her route to ultimate happiness. Polly is able to overcome her conditions of poverty because of confirmation to family rules, values and traditions that

heightens her self-esteem and ability to experience the transient moments of self-actualization in being self-reliant and dependable.

Unlike Fanny, Polly is privileged to be a public woman in being a music teacher, her works of charity, support for Woman's Rights, bonding of sisterhood with other women she meets in the society which also enables her self-actualization. Fanny and Polly are old-fashioned girls of their societies, discriminated for their poverty but emerge as women of substance and role models for others.

Hardships and struggles of poverty coupled with patience and endurance have groomed Fanny and Polly to refashion their areas of weaknesses into strengths. Both the female protagonists of Victorian England and America transcend the limitations of the family and the environment in capitalizing on the opportunities that they encounter. Austen promotes self-education in transcending the family dynamics in being groomed and educated at home whereas Alcott believes in empowering her heroines in being self-sufficient and self-reliant. Social expectations and social obligations constitute an integral part of grooming young women for adapting to society. The society influences the family dynamics which in turn affects the lives of all individuals in the family.

Austen's heroines are icons of change for the future of England in being carriers of transformation of an identity in initiating and adapting to social change in becoming good wives and mothers and competent in grooming their children amidst changing environment while carrying the traditional morals, values and traditional and cultural practices with them that retains their traditional identity in being English.

Alcott's mothers represent enthusiastic, keen mothers of New England who take initiative and pride in creating a new identity from their parent country in grooming their daughters by sharing their past experiences and encouraging learning through their participation in the affairs of the family and the community with a spirit of unity for democratic America.

## CONCLUSION

Fanny, the female protagonist of *Mansfield Park* transcends her family affiliation and social class through her self-education and the moral support of her cousin Edward in Mansfield Park. Her early hardships and struggles are her best teachers in paving her way through society and creating her identity. For Polly of *An Old-fashioned Girl*, purpose and principles are her best teachers as for other women in America. Family is integral to their grooming and education that instills an awareness of their consciousness in being born to struggle and endure. Polly is encouraged by her parents in learning through her exposure to society and in being self-reliant. Fanny's exposure is limited on grounds of her family status but is contended and as gratitude for her distinct education at Mansfield Park. Both the heroines are not old-fashioned in not being governed by the superficiality of the nineteenth century Victorian Era society; rather they have good manners, are respectful and are always willing to help others in need. Austen and Alcott have highlighted the significance of a woman's education and grooming in being useful to the society and creating their individual identity within the given limitations of the social expectations and obligations.

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